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ABSTRACT

A follow-up study of 15 gifted individuals in England and Canada over a period of 10 years following their college graduation explored the following areas: family background; preceptions of school and college experiences; career choices; persistence of creative activities in adulthood; religious and political affiliations; personal relationships; and psychological and emotional adjustment. It is suggested that the emotional problems and emotional needs of gifted children may persist in adulthood and merit further study. (JW)

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The Gifted Child Grows Up

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Presidential Address to the Atlantic Association for Gifted Children and Adults. October 1983

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Introduction

Dr. Roeper and Professor Meckstroth have given us some invaluable insights into the emotional problems and emotional needs of the gifted child. If these problems are not resolved in childhood we cannot doubt that they will be taken into adult life. I am going to devote the time we now have to a discussion of how the problems of the gifted child do manifest themselves in adult life. We know that the gifted child is bored at school. I am going to suggest that it merits investigation that the gifted adult is often bored at university, bored at work, bored in activities outside of work and even bored in personal relationships. I am going to share with you the experiences of a sample of fifteen gifted adults who have been followed up over a period of ten years. Of course I am the first to agree that fifteen is a small sample but I would like to draw your attention to the consistency of their responses. I am not drawing conclusions from these. What I am saying is that these responses show that there are problem areas which merit investigation.

The sample

From 1970-1972 I was engaged in research in England on career expectations and career aspirations among final year students. In 1972 I came to Canada. From 1972-1974 I added a Canadian sample. A total of two thousand final year students have been questioned. Thirty five of these final year students were identified as gifted. Over the years I have lost contact with twenty of them. They have not responded to my follow up letters. Fifteen are still being followed up. I am going to put up the details of these students (as they then were). The names of course have been altered.

Sandra - British, aged 23, Social Studies

Cynthia - British, aged 21, Business Administration

James - British, aged 26, for Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work (formerly Accountant)

Julie - British, aged 22, Spanish

David - British, aged 24, Anthropology

Arthur - British, aged 24, Fine Arts

Harold - British, aged 22, Theology

Joan - British, aged 21, Fine Arts

Andrew - British, aged 31, Psychology

George - British, aged 43, Education

Lisette - Canadian, aged 22, Geology

Susan - Canadian, aged 25, Nursing

Margaret - Canadian, aged 21, Russian and Science

Diana - Canadian, aged 22, Business Administration

Muriel - Canadian, aged 22, Business Administration

It is rather interesting to look at the creative activities in which these people were engaged.

Sandra - writing (novels and poetry), photography

Cynthia - writing (articles and short stories), painting, music, acting

James - composing pop music and songs

Julie - writing (poetry), music, acting

David - writing (plays and short stories), acting, choreography, drama production, ballet dancing, religious poetry

Arthur - abstract painting, stage design, photography, acting, drama production, writing (novels)

Harold - writing (satirical drama), music, composing songs and hymns

Joan - writing (poetry), abstract painting

Andrew - writing (novels and articles), photography

George - writing (novels, poetry, biography, articles), acting

Lisette - writing (novels, poetry, articles), ballet dancing, choreography

Susan - painting and designing

Margaret - writing (novels and poetry)

Diana - writing (novels and articles), photography, painting, music

Muriel - painting

Cynthia had had several articles published including a satirical article on Enoch Powell and one of her paintings had been exhibited at a local gallery. George had published a biography of a religious leader and mystic. David had published a number of articles on various aspects of the theatre and one short story which had received very enthusiastic reviews. However, such results depend to a great extent on chance and this aspect cannot be considered as a criterion for the creative drive. It is interesting to note that the only published work which brought satisfaction to the producer of it was Cynthia's satirical article and her painting. David did not feel the short story he had published was one of his better ones and was upset that the ones he felt were good were consistently rejected. As for his articles he wrote them off as "mere essays" and told me, "any b------ fool can write articles". George's book had received some very enthusiastic reviews but he himself felt it had not done his subject justice and "the editor made such a ----up of it I can take no pride in it".

Family Background

All of these people grew up in the upper socio economic level. Only Cynthia felt loved for herself at home and that her parents' love was not conditional on her achievements. James, Julie, David, Arthur, Lisette and

Margaret all felt that they were a status symbol to their parents from the age of six. Only Cynthia felt that her creative activities were fully supported and encouraged at home. Cynthia's father is a company president but Cynthia always felt that although he was an exceptionally busy man his family came first. Hastings (1981) draws attention to the tendency of parents and teachers to want the multi-talented child to zero-in on one talent. Only Cynthia did not report some pressure in this direction. Lasswell and Lobsenz (1980) point out that many children grow up feeling loved only if they do well at school. All the sample except Cynthia felt this.

School

The entire sample were bored at school and at times were put down by a teacher. All of them except Cynthia reported a sense of alienation from their peers at school. Cynthia knew she was different but that was quite all right with her. She knew she learned faster than the rest of the class and accepted it. She had a wide circle of friends.

University

Everyone in this sample felt cheated at university including all of the original 35 (Willings 1984). I will confine myself to observing here that this feeling of being cheated at University is reported by all the gifted adults with whom I have discussed giftedness since then and is substantiated by Snyder (1967) among students at M.I.T. and Heist (1967) among American students. It seems to be substantiated that among the gifted the drop out rate is three times higher than the national average. We cannot ignore the frequency with which gifted science students change to Arts. There is a very real need for investigation here. All these people could go on for graduate

work. Ten of them felt that they were totally disenchanted with full time education and could not take any more. I have to point out that this was the response of the entire Canadian sample.

Careers

Out of the original thirty-five students only one was not unhappy in his or her job fifteen months after graduation.

Cynthia had some difficulty finding a job in Personnel Management and when an opening arose on a local newspaper she decided to try it. She has been in journalism ever since. She finally acquired a job with a magazine specializing in golf. She enjoys her job.

Sandra is a Career Counsellor with the Department of Employment, Julie is an officer in the Women's Royal Air Force, Joan worked as a Research Assistant to a professor who was writing a book on the history of architecture and now teaches history of art and architecture at an art college. She describes herself as unfulfilled. Lisette is a geologist with an oil company. She told me "I have sold my soul but I've got a good price for it". Diana is in the Civil Service and bored. James found it difficult after his diploma was conferred to acquire a job in social work. Several prospective employers were suspicious about the fact that he had given up accountancy. I must add that his wife did not support him in his desire to change from accountancy to social work. Indeed she actively opposed it. He is now an accountant which he hates.

The others have made some radical career changes (Willings 1983). Let us have a look at them.

David - teacher - religious - professor of anthropology

Arthur - teacher - film director - unemployed

Harold - Anglican minister - teacher - probation officer

Andrew - consultant - freelance consultant - photographer

Susan - nurse - clinical psychologist

George - teacher - literary agent

Muriel - personnel manager - art gallery administrator - accountant

Margaret - medical school - graduate Italian - professor - unemployed

I am sure my concern will be shared that none of these gifted people have found fulfillment in teaching. I feel constrained to add that while at this University I have taught three gifted education students. None of them stayed in teaching. Torrance (1971) points out that the gifted often do change jobs quite frequently. Why does this happen. Paterson (1955) suggests that in our work we all of us experience two drives: -

the drive to be somebody

and

the drive to do something worthwhile

Dr. Paterson is most emphatic that both these drives must be equally gratified. If both drives are not equally gratified then the result will be severe frustration and a significant decrease in effectiveness. There are countless examples. The famous Spanish poet Federico García Lorca wrote a book of poems which made him instantly famous. For a book of poems to achieve best seller status is a small miracle. But Lorca was not happy with them. One day in a café the waiter recognized him and said "Señor Lorca, I just love your poems". Lorca went into a state of depression which lasted a year and was so severe that his friends thought he might take his own life. He was somebody. However, he did not find his successful book Romancero Gitano worthwhile. There are countless other examples which show what happens when the drive to be somebody and the drive to do something worthwhile are not equally satisfied. I would like to suggest that the

gifted very often have a very exalted sense of what is worthwhile. So they are particularly vulnerable to this disruptive inner conflict. The result is that for the gifted success itself can often be a grave frustrator because it makes them somebody but leaves them without the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile.

Creative Activities

Torrance (1980) has shown that the creative drive can be lost for all practical purposes. This has happened to some of my sample. Sandra, Julie, Harold, Lisette, Muriel and Diana no longer engage in creative activities. Julie told me "I've grown up. I haven't time for that crap".

Cynthia still writes general articles and has sold some of her paintings. She also has a wide reputation as a talented amateur actress. She feels she is having a satisfactory and fulfilled life and is able to enjoy being creative for its own sake.

James has sold three songs he has written and hopes eventually to make a living as a songwriter.

David believes that his time as a Ph.D. student ruined his literary style and he can no longer write general articles or novels. He has written two academic books but finds no satisfaction in them.

Joan occasionally publishes poems and exhibits abstract paintings. She told me "somewhere along the line I am not making it".

George is writing a biography of a pioneer of the socialist movement.

Religion

Koestler (1959) shows how historically faith and science have gone their separate ways. He contends that "as a result of their divorce neither faith nor science can satisy man's intellectual cravings". Most of the people

people in my sample have reported a search for a dynamic, for something outside of themselves and I have to say that the Churches have not entirely met that need, a situation which lends support to Koestler's contention.

Sandra regularly attended Church (Presbyterian) until she went to University. She still considers herself "a Christian of sorts" and would like to have a deep personal faith with no reasonable doubts.

Cynthia regularly attends Church (Anglican) but has not the time to become involved with the Church.

James considers that Christ was a great teacher and the world would be a better place if His teachings were followed. That is as far as it goes.

Julie's family were active in the Church (Methodist). She lost interest in the Church and frequently refers to the hyprocrisy of religious people. She describes herself as an agnostic but wishes she could believe. She had several talks with a minister but he was not able to answer her questions to her satisfaction.

David's family were active in the Catholic Church. At University he went through "an agony of doubt". After his experiences in a Religious Order he totally rejected the Christian Faith. He read a great deal on the B'hai Religion and felt it made a lot of sense but was not prepared to commit himself. For a few years he resumed active participation in the Catholic Church and an active devotional life. He has recently ceased attending Mass and regrets having done this but finds that the Church "does nothing for me" and he is troubled by "the simplistic theology of most priests". He maintains the habit of praying at night and saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary when he gets up in the morning.

Arthur was very active in the Anglican Church as a student but was put off by some of the "shallow reasoning" of some of the people in the Church.

He now describes himself as an agnostic but reads widely on Catholic doctrine and wishes he could "make an act of faith".

Harold believes he is serving God by trying to help people. He is sporadic in his Church attendance and attracted to the Catholic Church.

Joan considers herself an active Anglican but feels that "if degrees were awarded for skating over the surface most Anglican Priests would get a Ph.D.". She feels that the Church has failed to provide a dynamic which will motivate the whole lives of individuals. Much of her painting and poetry is on the theme of the painful efforts to find Christ. She also wrote a poem on the "electric smiles" (just switched on but not reflecting any feeling) of Christian people.

Andrew rejected his Catholic background while at University. He has now returned to the Church and become a very conversative Catholic strongly opposed to reforms such as the marriage of Priests, the toleration of birth control, liberalizing the attitude to divorce, and folk masses.

George has totally rejected the Catholic Church and any other Church. He has read widely on various Eastern religions and has accepted wholly the doctrine "true religion consists in doing violence to no man". He takes his beliefs a stage further and considers that true religion consists in helping anyone who needs help which he consistently practices.

Lisette attends mass regularly and has read several books on some of the mystics. She prays while she is driving to work; which I cannot recommend. She feels unable to commit herself any further and has not been to Confession since she entered University. It must be pointed out that as a child if ever she was naughty her mother would take her to the Parish Priest and have her confess her naughtiness. I view with the gravest possible concern the fact that the Priest allowed this, let alone encouraged it.

Susan was brought up an Anglican. From the age of seventeen onwards she went to various Churches trying to find a religion. She joined the Salvation Army largely because this is her husband's church. She asked me "does accepting Christ mean suspending your intellectual process"? I assured her that to me it meant exactly the opposite. "I wish you'd come and tell some of our people that" she replied.

Margaret regularly attended Mass until her final year as an undergraduate when she experienced a radical conversion. She became aggressively Evangelical and Fundamentalist (of course whatever she undertook she would very probably be aggressive about it). In fact one of the things which led her to being denied reappointment at her University was her sense of obligation "to tell my students about the Lord". She became vociferously intolerant of any religion other than her own and told me it is impossible for a Catholic or an Anglican to be in possession of Eternal Life. She remained with this Church for three years. During that time she and a friend regularly met at her apartment to pray that I would be saved. After two and a half years she became disenchanted but was troubled by her reservations. One evening packing for a trip she suddenly said "I'm through with this horseshit". She threw her Bible in the garbage, went out and bought a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. Since her Church strongly condemned smoking this was an act of separation from the Church. Last year she resumed attending Mass and had several discussions with the Priest. She described him as an "an intellectual lightweight" and stopped attending Mass.

Diana regularly attended Church (Baptist) with her parents and was Baptised as a teenager. For a year after her Baptism she felt a strong sense of satisfaction with her religion. This did not last. She occasionally attends Church and wishes she could find a sense of being close to God and

that her life was directed in a meaningful manner. "Sometimes" she said "I see a landscape or a beautiful view and I take a photograph of it and then I do feel a sense of closeness not to a bearded old man but to a limitless power".

Muriel never attended Church as a child. Occasionally she goes into a Church when there is no one there and tries to get a "sense of what is beyond space and time".

Members of this Association will know that I am a committed and practicing Catholic. I must register my grave concern that the Church has not yet met the needs of many of this sample who are left with a combination of belief and the fundamental discontent with unbelief.

Politics

Only three of the sample were active in politics. David was active for two years with the Conservative party but gave it up "in sheer disgust, there was no ability to think along a broad spectrum". George has become an active Communist and believes "Jesus Christ was the first real communist". Lisette joined the Parti Acadien (a party devoted to French speaking citizens of the Maritime Provinces) but left after six weeks describing it as hysteria of the worst kind. It makes me ashamed of being French". The rest of the sample have no interest in politics. Clearly they do not see any scope for creative development in this sphere of activity. This seems regrettable. We are living in an age when history is being made by people who do not understand history and do not apply its lessons. There is an urgent need for the gifted to become active in politics.

Personal Relationships

The experiences of this sample show the need to investigate two strong possibilities. Firstly that the gifted adult is often bored in personal

relationships and secondly that where a relationship is formed between a gifted and a more normally endowed person the more normally endowed person can be seriously threatened by the relationship. Cynthia, James, David, Arthur, Harold, Joan, Andrew, George, Susan and Muriel have married.

Cynthia describes her marriage as happy. She is able to share her creative activities with her husband and share in his.

The marriages of David, Arthur, Andrew, George and Susan have ended in divorce. David, Arthur and Andrew are quite definite that boredom was the cause.

Susan married because she was pregnant. The marriage was not happy. Her husband opposed her when she wanted to return to University for an MA in Psychology. She became pregnant again. Shortly after her second child was born her husband left her and went to live with a girl of seventeen who, he said "doesn't make me feel like a brainless slob". Susan offered to waive a claim of alimony if he would relinquish any access to the children. To this he agreed. She has now married a teacher at a reformatory. He shares her interest in psychopathic delinquents and has introduced art therapy with Susan's help in the reformatory. He has adopted Susan's children. She is very happy sharing her work and her life. Her only reservation is "Mark cannot readily accept the fact that there are times when I need to get away by myself, rediscover myself, charge up my batteries and get in touch with myself". Mark's parents and his family are active in the Salvation Army. Susan feels that if she were to leave the Salvation Army it would cause a family crisis. I tried to help Mark to see that the creative person often does need her own space and her own scope to develop but I didn't manage to do it.

Julie says of her marriage that there are some good times but on the whole marriage is a dreary business.

Muriel sees marriage as a fight to keep her independence.

Harold and Joan married each other. The fact that Harold is not happy in his work and still searching for fulfillment puts a strain on the marriage. They have two children. "Marriage" Joan comments "is only fulfilling at times but children really are a source of fulfillment".

Sandra, Julie, David, Andrew, Lisette, Margaret and Diana have all been through broken relationships or engagements. Julie had two broken engagements before she married and attributes the fact that they were broken off to boredom and Diana assigns the same cause to her two broken engagements. Diana now describes the man/woman relationship as "a bloody bore".

Lisette has had five broken engagements. She told me she was searching for someone who would excite her in the intellectual sense and "need all the love I can give. After a year no relationship can be exciting in the sense that I mean exciting. I was looking for too much but if I can't have that, then I'll be mademoiselle." At present she has a boyfriend whom she describes as "rather like a cuddly teddy bear" but has no thought of marrying him. She told me "part of me could marry Radar in MASH. He's cute".

David had two broken engagements while at College, and another after he left the Religious Order. The first engagement was broken off by the girl, who, alluding to his high level of activity and many interests, told him "I just can't keep pace with you. You are the most exhausting person I know". His other two engagements were broken off by him because he became bored with the relationship.

Andrew and George after their marriages failed formed an intense relationship with a girl who eventually found the relationship exhausting and herself ended it.

Margaret has had three broken engagements. Of the first she says "He was devoted to me. Anything I wanted he'd do. He spent more than he could afford buying me presents. I was in medical school when he suddenly said "I don't want to see you again, get out of my life". Her second engagement also ended when her fiancé said "I say to you let's share our lives but you demand I make you a gift of mine. If we got married I'd be Mr. Margaret .....". Of her third engagement she reports that she was again the dominant partner. This ended when in her words "he stopped seeing me: didn't even have the guts to tell me it was off". She is at present living with an Assistant Professor of Education who has twice been selected for the Canadian Olympic team. She is becoming bored with the relationship which she perceives herself as the dominant partner. She is resentful of the "reflected glory" of living with an Olympic athlete. He believes that the public schools are doing a good job. Margaret energetically refutes this and there have been some severe quarrels over this topic.

In our over-organized society personal relationships have never been more complex. These responses may merely reflect the complexity of personal relationships. On the other hand it may reflect needs among the gifted and research is needed here.

Adjustment

Julie, David, Arthur, Harold, Joan and George have all consulted psychiatrists. None of them feel they were helped. Julie, David, Arthur and George all feel that the problem was that they were more intelligent than the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist Joan consulted saw everything in terms of birth trauma. He wanted her to ingest LSD and relive her birth. She read some material on LSD and flatly refused to ingest it.

David, Harold, Andrew and George all believe they benefitted from analytic psychotherapy. George consulted a Jungian analyst and felt that he was not helped because he was more intelligent than the analyst. He then consulted an analytic psychotherapist of whom he said "I didn't have to talk down to him" and George believes he was helped. While she was a research assistant Joan went to Holland to consult some archives. She met a Dutch psychologist who was also a devout Catholic. She talked with him informally and still meets him and writes to him from time to time. This Dutch psychologist showed Joan that she still had alot of unfinished business with her mother.

Margaret consulted a professional counsellor, not a psychiatrist, on her inability to make personal relationships. From what she says it appears she saw herself as in competition with him. She says he was of no help. She started seeing him again and then her conversion took place. She believed all her problems to be solved. She attributed her failure to be reappointed to the University to the belief "it is not the Lord's will that I teach University".

Julie, David, Andrew, Arthur and George have attempted suicide. Andrew and George attempted this after the failure of a relationship. David and Julie decided that they did not wish to go on living because they believed themselves to be failures (Willings 1984). For the past two years Arthur has been receiving treatment for incipient alcoholism.

Dr. Roeper has pointed out that many of the gifted never give themselves permission to fail. With the exception of Cynthia all of the sample felt they were failures. Susan felt she was doing a good job but described herself as a failed artist. Dr. Roeper has also drawn attention to the mandate to stand out from the group. Alice Miller (1981) suggests that

many gifted children become depressed and have a feeling of emptiness if they are not what she calls "on top". This affects career aspirations.

To James life would be worth living if he were a famous composer.

Julie did not really feel that life was worth living anyway but it could be tolerable if she were a famous poet in her words "an English García Lorca".

David gets no satisfaction out of his two anthropology texts. He told me "any bloody fool can write texts". He would have made something of his life if he could be a famous novelist.

Harold felt from an early age that he had a mandate to become a Bishop. That he left the Ministry is a sign that he is a failure.

Andrew had a desperate need to be a famous writer on psychology and eclipse Eysenk. When he gave it up and became a photographer his need was to be a famous photographer.

Margaret had two aspirations, to be a famous surgeon and a best selling novelist. When she left medical school she said "it is not the Lord's will that I be a surgeon".

I could substantiate these with other cases but I just want to show you that this mandate to be outstanding is carried into adult life. All of us have fantasies but to many of the gifted life is not worth living without fulfilling them.

Rollo May (1967) suggests that in modern western societies any person is likely to "experience himself as without significance as an individual". I suggest and base my suggestion on experience of counselling the gifted that we often get <u>conditions for significance</u>. The gifted teenager may conclude in effect.

I am without significance unless I am producing
I am without significance unless I am seen to achieve.
I am without significance unless I am on top.
I am without significance unless I get good grades.
I am without significance unless I am given a leadership role.

Thus from an early age, as early as the age of nine, the child's values shift from the intrinsic goals to externally imposed and often artificial values. Values shift from "what I would like to do" to "what I must be seen to do in order to make life worth living and convince myself of my own worth".

Dr. Roeper points out that the gifted child is often asking "who am I"? If he doesn't get an answer as a child he is in danger of arriving in adult life at his own answer "a being without significance".

Shyness

All the sample reported that they were outgoing and talkative as children. I am going to suggest a hypothesis that again needs to be investigated. This is that where a child is made to feel that this is "naughty" or at least unacceptable there is a danger that the child will grow up shy and ill at ease in company. Seven of my sample now report this - that they are shy and socially ill at ease.

Sandra at the age of three was given the nickname "chatterbox" by her parents and perceived her animated talking as naughty. By the age of fourteen she was shy and tended to avoid meeting new people. She still is the same way.

David was talkative and outgoing. By the age of four he would strike up animated conversations with visitors to his parents' home. He was rebuked for this and told to behave in front of visitors. He would get into conversation with total strangers and was told by his parents he must not do this. At the age of nine he was told by his headmaster he had too much to say

say for himself. By the age of twelve he was shy and self effacing. As it happens he was then continually rebuked by his father for this.

Harold was also frequently rebuked for his animated talkativeness by his father and was shy and ill at ease by the age of eleven, a condition which persists.

Joan was not only talkative but argumentative as a child. She appears to have shown that characteristic of the gifted child, an intolerance for the illogical. Arguments with her mother would inevitably result in her being beaten. She was shy and self contained by the age of six and remains so.

Andrew's talkativeness led his father to lose his temper several times. At school he was beaten for trying to discuss a point with a teacher. He now describes himself as "very shy indeed and irritated by small talk".

Diana was not only rebuked by her parents and a teacher for being talkative she was teased by the others in the class. She became shy and the condition still persists.

Muriel grew up in an atmosphere of unspoken conflict and animosity between her parents. She was an outgoing child until the age of six and then withdrew into herself. "I still am an extremely private person. I am very ill at ease in groups".

Julie, Margaret and George were also rebuked by their parents for being talkative. They have become aggressive, intolerant of other opinions and apt to throw aside anything which challenges their ideas.

Shyness is acknowledged by many psychologists to reflect a fractured self image. Coleman (1981) makes the point that the child's high level of energy and talkativeness can strain the family to breaking point. However, where the child is made to feel that this outcome of giftedness is naughty the damage to the self image can last for the rest of their lives.

Concluding Comments

I have already stressed that all I am saying is that the problems which the gifted child takes into adult life merit investigation. I would conclude by presenting one strong possibility. Dr. Roeper has repeatedly said that only the child who feels loved will develop a healthy self image. I have stressed the need for "psychological safe places" and the chance to ineract with "psychologically safe people". Only to Cynthia was home a psychologically safe place. Only Cynthia has been happy in her work since she graduated. Only Cynthia knew she was different but accepted it. Only Cynthia is fulfilled in her marriage. We can be thoroughly scientific and say this is one case. We can then be academically respectable and throw it out. As people concerned for the fulfillment of gifted individuals can we afford to take that risk.

This Association has established the Saturday Club for gifted children. We have also established the Tuesday Club where gifted adults meet, discuss mutual problems and enjoy various creative exercises. Needless to say we meet on Tuesdays! Our experiences in the Tuesday Club as well as the information in this address leave us with two convictions. Many of the problems suffered by the gifted child can be taken into adult life (Roeper and Willings 1983). Secondly, the gifted adult needs help just as much as the gifted child.

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